

# FORGET THE WARM FUZZIES:

When Institutional Equals Ineffective

by

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*The following story is true. Actual events have been distorted to make the author look better. Names have been changed to keep people guessing.*

“Don’t do it.”

That was my recent advice to a new sales rep, “Randy.”

Randy’s new to radio, but not to business. He’s a veteran of the trenches and hand-to-hand sales combat. Because of his background, Randy thinks a lot like his clients. This can be good. But it also means Randy is easily infected by an enthusiastic client’s Creative Idea—even if it’s bankrupt.

To his credit, though, Randy knows enough to talk with a copywriter before plowing headlong with a new idea.

And at the moment, based on a lively client chat, Randy was proposing new creative for a mortgage broker, “Max.” Max was a long-time advertiser. He wanted something new and fresh and WOW. So, infected as he was, Rep Randy wrote copy based on the client’s Creative Idea: **BIG, IMPORTANT PATRIOTIC MUSIC, UNDER.** ANNCR speaks glowingly of American

life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Of how Max chose his company’s name because of his staunch belief in these freedoms. And one manifestation of those freedoms is being free to choose Max for your next mortgage.

I wasn’t as diplomatic as I could’ve been. (I can be that way. Fortunately, Randy has teenagers.) After spitting coffee all over the desktop, I said, “Max wants to sell mortgages, right?”

“Yep.”

“There’s nothing in this copy that sells mortgages.”

“Yeah, but—”

“But the swelling of American pride will convince listeners they should call Max.”

“Yep.”

“Nope.”

“Why?”

“Borrowed interest.”

“Borrowed what?”

“Borrowed interest. You take something with absolutely no organic relationship to your product, and you paste it onto the sales pitch in an attempt to be creative.”

“But what about—”

“That Chevy dealer?”

“That’s why I thought this might work.”

Figured as much. We have a client, “Chet,” who’s done something really interesting: pure institutional advertising *that sells*. (Sidebar example for anyone trying to remember “institutional advertising.” Consumer ad: “Chevron drives your engine clean.” Institutional ad: “Chevron is the warm, fuzzy oil company that builds artificial reefs so pretty fish will have a home.”)

Chet’s dealer ads offer NO sales message. His 60 seconds are his pulpit for inspirational or political commentary. The result: customers come buy Chet’s Chevys because they like who he is. I said to rep Ralph (by now completely baffled), “Our goal is to make Max’s phone ring. Chet doesn’t care about his phone. He has the luxury of long-term branding. By the time I’m ready to buy a Chevy, ‘Chet’ is the only name I want to remember.”

“So why not Max?”

“His phone has to ring today. And currently, his phone rings because he’s designated a target audience: someone who’s behind the 8-ball of consumer-debt. He convinces them he’s got the solution to their problem, he’s got the best rates, and he’s going to provide service.”

“So we can’t do the patriotic angle?”

“At best, it won’t make the phone ring.”

“How about ‘At worst?’”

“It’ll offend people.”

“Why? Our listeners are political conservatives. They’re all about patriotism!”

“Boil it down to this: Max steps up to the microphone and says, ‘John Hancock signed the Constitution because

he wanted you to call me.’ That’s crass enough to offend even me.”

“Oh.” Ralph looked down at his script a moment. “Could we do it without the sales message? Make it a straight institutional spot?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“It won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“No compelling reason to call. If I need a mortgage, I need it now. And every day, I’m bombarded with mortgage advertising. You want my business? Speak to my dreams, assure me you’ll do what I need, or I’m gone.”

Ralph looked at me like I was reading from the *Kaballah*. “How can you be sure?”

“We already tried it. Same strategy. Different mortgage broker. Solid institutional ads like Chet’s. Inspiring. Heart-swelling. And no phone ringing—until we finally took the campaign back to a targeted sales message with a problem/solution scenario and a firm call to action.”

“Glad I talked to you about this before I went back to meet the client. Any suggestions?”

“Stick with his tried and true formula. We can always freshen it. But we still designate the target borrower. We speak to their dream. We pitch to their problems directly with a solution supported by hard facts. Finally, we tell them how to respond.”

“He’s tired of that.”

“Tough. We all get burned out on our own advertising long before the good citizens of this fair city even realize they’ve heard it.”

“And he’s not getting enough calls.”

“That’s partly our fault. We’ve let him stray from his core message. We need to get him back on the track. But

also, the market is soft for all our mortgage clients right now.”

“You’re saying we can’t make his spots better?”

“Never said that. We can always make ‘em better. Problem is, we’ve been letting him make ‘em worse.”

“Oh.”

“And I guarantee this: we stick with what we know works, and his phone will continue to ring and will ring more as the market comes back around. But if we go with an institutional spot that doesn’t present a convincing sales message, his phone will stop ringing.”

“That’s a guarantee I don’t want to test.”

Me neither.

*Rep Ralph got Mortgage Max back on target. Max’s response went back up. There was much rejoicing.*